

The Wreck of the Joseph Howe: a Fuller Story

JOS 1875-76.												
Official Number. International Code Signal Letters.	Ships' Names.		Masters.	Registered Tonnage. Net Gross Under Deck.	Registered Dimensions.			Engines of Steamers. Builders of Engines. Materials. Repairs of Ships, &c.	Build.		Owners.	Port belonging to.
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Lloyd's Register of British and Foreign Shipping



A mid-nineteenth-century merchant brigantine, representative of vessels of the Joseph Howe's type – image from Wikimedia Commons



Cliffs at Faill na dTadhg, photo by Helen Riddell

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"The facts speak only when the historian calls on them." —E. H. Carr 1961

Introduction

The brigantine Joseph Howe was wrecked off Bere Island 150 years ago. It's not the largest ship to have been wrecked near the Island, or the wreck with the largest loss of life. But it's the one whose story gets retold the most. A poem/song was composed locally at the time. In 1937, five pupils in the senior classes in the Bere Island National Schools gathered five separate versions of the story from their parents and grandparents and submitted them to the Schools Folklore Collection. The principal of Lawrence Cove Girls School added an entry from a Castletownbere man "age 67, reared and spent his early manhood in Greenane and who remembers the incident even though only 4 years at the time." Ted O Sullivan's 1992 book recounts several dozen shipwrecks but singles out the Joseph Howe for extra coverage. Each year, to mark Poetry Day Ireland, the poem has been posted to the Bere Island Facebook page. The story was added to the online Bere Island Community Archive in 2024. Later that year, one version of the poem and a lesser-known aspect of the event were included in an article in the online version of the Echo.

Our piece in the 2025 Bere Island Christmas Newsletter described the variations in the pupils' accounts of the numbers saved (four to six) and the even bigger disagreements about the numbers lost —from one ("only the little cabin boy") to four. In his book, Ted had noted that "local knowledge says that four were drowned and four saved" while "Lloyd's List says that only two men were drowned." **Using accounts from newspapers of the time, we were able to clear up some of the confusion. The voyage began with eight; a total of four were indeed lost – two early on in the voyage, and two near Bere Island -- and four were saved.** Asked to comment, Ted replied, "It shows that the folklore isn't always correct but rarely far wrong either."

The poem immortalized the four survivors. However, twenty-first century re-tellings, including the headline in the Echo story, have added a 'dark' post-rescue aspect concerning the captain and the boatswain. **With the help of the descendants of the captain, and the newspapers of the time, this extended piece elaborates on the story, which involves two separate overseers, the Crown and the Board of Trade.**

The events are a good example of how, once information gets 'out there,' a narrative takes on a life of its own, and isn't easily 'un-told.' We hope readers will examine these fuller accounts, and then decide for themselves what headline they would like to see used when the online accounts are updated.

The piece ends with some archival material about the heroes of the story, the two Bere Island men who rescued the four seamen.

[Readers who are short on time may wish to focus on the passages in bold, which mark the key findings and turning points in the story.]

Newspaper (and pupils') reports of the wreck

The news of the loss reached Lloyd's on Friday the 18th of February, and on the Saturday, under the heading

LATEST SHIPPING INTELLIGENCE
(FROM LLOYD'S, FEB 18.)
WRECKS AND CASUALTIES

the London Times reported

"CASTLETOWN, BEREHAVEN, Feb. 18.-The Joseph Howe, brigantine, of London, from Minatitlan, with mahogany, for Queenstown or Falmouth for orders, was lost on Bere Island last night; two hands drowned."

The following Saturday (the 26th) the Cork Examiner had more details

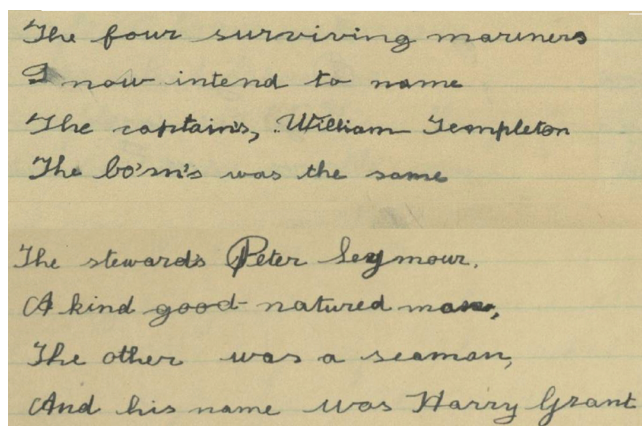
"Two of the crew were drowned while attempting to land in a boat. The master and three others who remained on the ship were taken off next morning. She has since become a total wreck, and it is feared that very little of the cargo can be saved in consequence of the unfavourable state of the weather."

and yet more the following Tuesday (the 29th)

"THE LATE WRECK AT BERE – It is expected that the Brigantine Joseph Howe, of Belfast, will go to pieces in this gale and it is probable that the greater part of the cargo will float into Bantry. A hogshead of rum was washed ashore at Whiddy a few days since. It is at present in the hands of the Custom House officer (Mr. Delaney). A hogshead of brandy was broken on the rocks. – *Bantry Correspondent.*

The four survivors

They are named in the pupil's versions of the poem, such as this one from Finbarr Murphy:



The four surviving mariners
I now intend to name
The captain, William Gempleton
The boatswain was the same

The steward Peter Legmore,
A kind good-natured man,
The other was a seaman,
And his name was Harry Grant

Charges brought against the captain and the boatswain

Prevailing version of this development

None of the school essays mention these charges, but then most of them consisted of just the poem itself, which deals only with the rescue. However, as we will see below, the statement in one pupil's own narrative ("all the crew were saved only the little cabin boy was lost.") might be a clue that people were aware of the subsequent development. Ted O'Sullivan's book does not mention it.

The first Bere-Island-documented version of the development seems to be in the text that accompanied the version of the poem that was posted on The Bere Island Group Facebook page in February 2013.

"However, the steward reported to the authorities that during the voyage the captain had attacked the galley boy, who later died from his injuries and was buried at sea. The captain was found guilty of manslaughter and sentenced to eighteen months hard labour."

Further details were provided in the posting the following year

"However, not long after their ordeal, the steward Peter Seymour reported to the coastguards that during the voyage the captain had ill treated the galley boy, attacking him and knocking the young boy unconscious. The galley boy eventually died from his injuries and was buried at sea. On hearing this, the coastguard notified the Royal Irish Constabulary and the captain was arrested. He was, tried and found guilty of manslaughter. He was sentenced to eighteen months hard labour."

A version of the poem, a colour photo of the Cliffs at Faill na dTadhg and a fuller text, including the following, were added to the online Bere Island Community archive in February 2024.

"The rescued men were then brought into Castletownbere where the steward Peter Seymour reported to the local authorities that during the voyage the captain had ill-treated the galley boy, attacking him and knocking the young boy unconscious. The galley boy eventually died from his injuries and was buried at sea. The Royal Irish Constabulary were informed, and the captain was arrested. He was tried and found guilty of manslaughter and sentenced to eighteen months hard labour."

In August of that year, in the online version of the Echo, weekly columnist Tom MacSweeney repeated these statements under the story headline "The wreck of the Joseph Howe at Bere Island uncovered dark cruelty aboard."

Thanks to recent communications from relatives of Captain Templeton, and with the help of further reports in the online archives of the newspapers of the time, we can now provide an updated version.

Updated version of this development

Our initial search seemed to be bear out the Bere Island version.

On that same day (Saturday February 26, 1876) that it first reported on the wreck, the Cork Examiner also reported this `developing story.'

SHIPWRECK AT BEREHAVEN – SERIOUS CHARGE AGAINST THE MASTER

A very serious charge has been made by two of the survivors against the master and boatswain (whose name is also Mr. Templeton), of having caused the death of the mate, a man named George H. Roberts, by beating him in the most brutal manner during the voyage. It is alleged that poor Roberts was in a very delicate state, and unable to do his work properly. These facts having been reported to the very efficient and active Sub-inspector, Mr. Waters, he had the two men arrested and brought before Dr. Armstrong, J P, who investigated the matter. The results of the investigation was that both the captain and boatswain were committed for trial to the next assizes.—*West Cork Eagle*.

That same Saturday, the (Dublin-based) Freemans Journal had just two sentences about it

“The survivors charged Templeton, the master, and the boatswain with causing the death of Roberts, the mate, by beating. Both were brought before the magistrates yesterday, and were committed for trial.”

Two weeks later, on Saturday the 11th of March, the Cork Examiner reported

CORK SPRING ASSIZES COUNTY CROWN COURT (Before Mr. Justice Lawson.)

ALLEGED MURDER ON THE HIGH SEAS

William Templeton, master, and William Templeton, mate, pleaded not guilty to an indictment charging them with the wilful murder of George Roberts, a seaman, on the high seas. Their trial was fixed for Monday.

The long accounts in the Cork Examiner and the longer one in the Cork Daily Herald of the March 14 court proceedings are reproduced in Annex 1. In its reports from various counties, the Freemans Journal of the same day had this summary.

ASSIZES INTELLIGENCE (from our Reporters) CORK.

Cork, Tuesday.

Today, at the sitting of the County Court, Judge Lawson proceeded to try Wm. Templeton, master, and another, William Templeton, boatswain, of the brigantine Joseph Howe, for the manslaughter on the high seas of the mate of the same vessel, George H. Roberts. Mr. Atkinson defended. The prisoners were found guilty, with a recommendation to mercy. They were then put back.

On the 16th, the Belfast Newsletter carried a one paragraph report that repeated the accusation, and ended with

The captain's log-book spoke of the mate on the 28th of October last as having been beaten with a belaying pin by a seaman named McClure, but nothing was mentioned in the log about the mate after October until the 12th of January, when it stated that he was very ill, and that next day he died and was buried. The prisoners were found guilty, with a recommendation to mercy. They were put back. Both prisoners belong to Belfast.

Curiously, we could not find any evidence in the newspapers up to then that corroborated the Bere Island story of a sentence of eighteen months hard labour. The reason for the absence of a sentence only became evident when descendants of the captain recently contacted Bere Island with this message

"This is an article that was posted 3/29/1876 in regards to the sentencing of Captain Templeton and the boatswain on the Joseph Howe. My cousin found the article and we wanted to share it with the group. I'm sending this on behalf of 3 cousins who would like Captain William Templeton to be remembered by his great and great great grandchildren!"

The article they supplied was entitled Manslaughter of a Ship's Mate, from the Belfast News-Letter of Wednesday, Mar 29, 1876. It gave as the source the Cork Daily Herald, which, a week earlier, published this account.

THE CORK DAILY HERALD, WEDNESDAY MORNING, MARCH 22, 1876

CORK SPRING ASSIZES: COUNTY COURT

Judge Lawson sat at [...] o'clock yesterday morning.

SENTENCING PRISONERS

William Templeton, master of the Belfast ship "Joseph Howe," and William Templeton, boatswain, who had been found guilty of the manslaughter of George Roberts, the mate of that ship, on the high seas, were put forward in the dock.

His lordship said—Both William Templetons, you were found guilty before me on a charge of manslaughter, that is by accelerating the death of your mate by assaulting him. I have considered the case very anxiously since it was tried, and I am bound to say the conviction has not been altogether satisfactory to my own mind. I don't think any evidence in the case can be relied on except that of the foreign seaman, and his evidence, though it would establish a charge of assault against both of you, would not, in my judgment, at all establish the charge on which you were tried—that is, having treated the man so as to accelerate his death. **Therefore, on the whole, having regard to the very excellent character you have received, and to your previous good conduct, I have come to the conclusion that I won't pass sentence upon either of you, but discharge you both, on entering into your own recognizances to appear whenever called upon.**

Reports of the subsequent Board of Trade enquiry mention that decision of the judge in their introductory paragraph. For example, in its March 30 report, the Belfast Newsletter tells its readers that

CORK, WEDNESDAY.—A Board of Trade inquiry was opened to-day in Cork with respect to the loss on the west coast of Ireland, of the brigantine Joseph Howe. [...] **The master of the vessel, Wm. Templeton, was in attendance. This is the same man who was tried at the last assizes and convicted with the boatswain of causing the death of the second mate, but whom the judge, on a review of the facts, allowed to be discharged on his own recognizances.**

Answers we may never get

It is not clear how, over the ensuing almost 150 years, the Bere Island version of this part of the story mutated to its present form. Is the “little cabin boy” in the pupils telling of the losses connected with the ‘young’ galley boy who was attacked in the Facebook telling, or the ‘youngster’ galley boy in the Echo article?

More importantly, how did the story about a sentence of 18 months’ hard labour take hold? Was it conflated with an outcome of the Board of Trade enquiry, a topic to be addressed in the next section?

The Board of Trade enquiry into the wreck

Although the enquiry took place in Cork, the Cork Examiner of March 30 merely tells its readers regarding the first day is that

“The inquiry ordered by the Board of Trade respecting the loss of the brigantine Joseph Howe on the South Western coast of Ireland in February was opened in this city today [Wednesday March 29]. William Templeton, the boatswain, was examined, and attributed the disaster to the weather and the fact that several of the crew had been disabled by illness. The inquiry will be resumed today.”

The fuller coverage of the first day is again to be found in the accounts in the Cork Daily Herald and in the Belfast Newsletter, both of which are reproduced in Annex 2. The Examiner provided this summary of the second day

BOARD OF TRADE INQUIRY.—The enquiry into the loss of the ship Joseph Howe was resumed yesterday at the Police office, before Mr. J.S. MacLeod, R.M., and two nautical assessors. Henry Ghronn, seaman, and Peter Seymour, cook on board the vessel were examined as to the events of the voyage and the loss of the ship, but their evidence added in no material respect to the information given yesterday. The latter said he thought that the vessel might have been saved if the anchors had been let go. The inquiry was adjourned until twelve o'clock today.

Again, the Belfast Newsletter provided the bottom line.

BOARD OF TRADE INQUIRY.

CORK, MONDAY.—The Court delivered judgment in the Board of Trade inquiry respecting the loss of the Joseph Howe, wrecked on the west coast of Ireland in February. They held that the loss of the vessel was owing to a mistake of reckoning on the part of the master, Wm. Templeton, and to his not having, when he discovered his position, and while he had light of day and a fair wind, run for Berehaven, where he could have obtained assistance, being at the time short-handed. They suspended his certificate for six months, but recommended he should receive a mate's certificate.

A further and very recent update

In May of 2024, a great-great granddaughter of this Wm. Templeton contacted the Bere Island Community Archive about this story, and shared the newspaper articles she had found many years earlier. One, from the Glasgow Herald of March 31, was the same coverage of the first day of the enquiry as in the Belfast Newsletter. The other, from the Liverpool Mercury, has a slightly shorter summary of the judgement,

A Board of Trade Inquiry at Cork respecting the loss of the Joseph Howe, wrecked on the west coast of Ireland has resulted in suspension of the

master, William Templeton, for six months, but with a recommendation that he should receive a mate's certificate.

She also added

He did return to the sea as Mate. He was restored to Master on several ships and First Officer on a few. In 1893 he was accepted as Chief Officer of the Gibraltar/Grampian Training Ship in Belfast. So he was a seaman for his entire life. He died in 1909.

The rescuers

There are a number of questions about the rescuers: who were they? what monetary and other awards did they receive? And what form did the original of the 'poem' actually take?

Who were they?

They were named in the Schools Collection in 1937, and in Ted O'Sullivan's 1992 book, as Dennis Harrington and Michael Shanahan of Greenane.

The Bere Island section of the online Irish Community Archive tells us that Dennis was 21 years of age. One wonders if that was the age Michael Shanahan was. There's a Denis Harrington listed as 73 years of age in the 1901 census (see below). Could he have been the 48-year old, when [when out looking for wrack – SH: I can't remember where I read this part about being looking for wrack] he heard the cries of the seamen, went to get the younger Shanahan to help him with the rescue? [There is a Michael Shanahan in the same census, who age is reported as 58; this would put him as a 33-year-old when the wreck occurred. Of course, we can't entirely depend on the census: someone who was 21 in 1876 might well have emigrated, and not even been captured in the 1901 census.]

We would prefer to be able to draw a direct line back to the two rescuers. We are awaiting further details from Margaret Dennehy, a grand-daughter of Mary White, née Harrington (see below).

The recognitions and the awards they got

None of the pupils mentioned these, but the very last entry from the Lawrence Cove Girls School did. Ahead of a poem, entitled "The Wreck of the Joseph Howe, by Denis C. Harrington", the principal, Mrs. Sullivan Doyle, writes

"From Mr M Martin O'Sullivan, Castletownbere, Co. Cork. Age 67. Reared and spent his early manhood in Greenane and who remembers the incident even though only 4 years at the time. I have seen parchment which was presented to the composer [the] late Denis Harrington who with Michael Shanahan effected the rescue.

Ted's book tells us that "This heroic rescue was hailed at the time and the heroes were presented with certificates;" and the Community Archive adds that "Dennis Harrington received the sum of 15 pounds for his bravery."

In fact, as the newspaper archives are to tell us, there were two sets of awards, from two two highly respected institutions. The first award, in May of that year, was from an institution that Berehaven and well beyond still depend on

SHEFFIELD DAILY TELEGRAPH, MAY 6, 1876.

GALLANT LIFEBOAT SERVICES.

On Thursday a meeting of the Boyal National Lifeboat Institution, was held In London, Thomas Chapman, Esq. F.R.S In the chair. Rewards amounting to £190 were granted to the crews of different lifeboats of the Society for serves rendered during the storms of the past month ...

The silver medal of the Institution, inscribed on vellum, and £3 each were voted to Michael Shanahan and Dennis Harrington, of Bere Island, county Gork, in acknowledgment of their gallant and determined conduct in descending, at much risk of life, a precipitous cliff, between 200 and 300 feet high, and rescuing four of the crew of the brigantine Joseph Howe, of London,, which was wrecked on Bere Island during foggy and blowing weather on the 18th February last."

The proceedings of the meeting were widely reported in British newspapers; the Bere Island item appeared in "The Nation" three weeks later

In reference to the recent gallant rescue of a shipwrecked crew at Bere Island, Mr. W. J. Tomkins, of Cork, has received the following :—"Royal National Lifeboat Institution, London, 13th May, 1876. —My dear sir—I have duly received your note of the 11th instant and its enclosure, and I have the satisfaction to acquaint you that the very gallant services of Denis Harrington and Michael Shannahan, of Bero Island, on the occasion to which you refer, were brought under the notice of this committee at their last monthly meeting, when the silver medal of the institution, its thanks inscribed on vellum, and the sum of £3 were voted to each man. I am sure the rewards of the society in this case will afford you peculiar gratification.—I am yours very truly, R. Lewis."

The second award, in September of that year, was also widely reported throughout the British Isles. Every newspaper -- even the Dublin one! -- repeated the same geography error, which presumably originated in London.

THE FREEMANS JOURNAL, THURSDAY, SEPTEMBER 21, 1876

The Board of Trade has awarded £5 each to Messrs. Harrington and Shannahan, two farmers of Kerry, in acknowledgment of their gallantry in rescuing the master and crew of the ship Joseph Howe, which was wrecked on Bear Island, county Kerry, on February 17th, 1876.

Two days later, claiming them as their own, even the newspaper in our neighbouring county did the same.

KERRY EVENING POST, SATURDAY SEPTEMBER 23

REWARD OF GALLANTRY.—The Board of Trade has awarded £5 each to Messrs Harrington and Shannahan, to farmers of this county, in acknowledgment of their gallantry in rescuing the master and crew of the ship Joseph Howe, which was wrecked on Bear Island, county Kerry, on February 17th, 187

The poem

Ted O'Sullivan has been looking into the poem – said to have been composed by Dennis Harrington himself.

Bere Island

17 February 1876

Faill na dTadhg

The *Joseph Howe* was a brigantine of 355 tons owned by S. Hill of Island Magee, Co. Antrim. It was heading for Cork with a cargo of mahogany from Mexico when it was wrecked on the southern shore of Bere Island. Lloyd's List says that only two men were drowned but local knowledge says four were drowned and four saved. (See poem below.) The cargo was salvaged in an undamaged condition and taken to Castletownbere. A porthole from this ship is in use as a roof window in a house in Greenane, while some of its timbers were recycled as roof trusses.

The Joseph Howe Rescue 1876

When the *Joseph Howe* was wrecked at *Faill na dTadhg* on 17 February 1876, four survivors were thrown onto a ledge on the cliff and were spotted by a local man, Dennis Harrington. He, assisted by his neighbour, Michael Shanahan, climbed down the precipice and rescued the stranded sailors, one at a time. This heroic rescue was hailed at the time and the heroes were presented with certificates. The following is a version of a poem said to have been composed by Dennis Harrington and supplied to me by Finbar Murphy of Derrycreeveen.

On the 18th of last February
Just by the break of day
As I arose and put on my clothes
To the sea I made my way.
When coming to a seaside cliff
I espied an awful scene
Dashing on the rocks below
Lay a large brigantine.
I was struck with amazement
While gazing on the wreck
The ship was loudly creaking
With three men upon her deck.

Another from the bowline
Lay swinging from the boom
To reach the shore his object
But death would be his doom.

They launched out the longboat
Not thinking of their fate
The boat capsized, four men were drowned
On that unlucky date.

With little hesitation
Another man and I
Descended this great precipice
Which was both steep and high.

The bosun swung a lifeline
Which we risked our lives to take
As the Atlantic waves rolled furiously
And upon the rocks did break.

With the help of the lifeline
We saved four lives that day
Who, but for our exertions
Would have been washed away.

The four surviving mariners
I now intend to name
The captain's William Templeton
The bosun's was the same.

The steward's Peter Seymour
a kind good-natured man
The other was a seaman
His name was Harry Grant.

The *Joseph Howe* I beg to state
Was the ship in which they sailed
She came from Minatitlan
And from London town was hailed.

With a cargo of Mahogany
To Cork for orders bound
But at *Faill na dTadhg*, Bere Island's side,
Her destiny she found.

A Short History

Ted O'Sullivan

Conclusion

Writers have long noted how challenging it is to stop partial stories from becoming urban myths. More than three hundred years ago, Jonathan Swift noted “Falsehood flies, and the truth comes limping after it.” As communications speed up, this ‘law’ was updated: a commonly cited version is that “A lie can travel halfway around the world while the truth is putting on its shoes,” a quote that, ironically, is widely – but falsely! – attributed to Mark Twain. Just how difficult it is to *un-tell* a story, or stop fiction from becoming fact, is very evident in today’s near instant media communications, despite the best efforts of fact-checkers and posted corrections.

A hundred and fifty years ago, when the Joseph Howe was wrecked, information on the actions of the Crown and the Board of Trade would have spread orally. Newspaper stories were read by the few who could read, read out to a crowd, and retold later—thereby accumulating further mutations.

It is quite possible that news of the judge’s decision regarding the two William Templetons, and the Board of Trade sanction regarding the captain never reached Bere Island at the time. The Cork Examiner’s coverage of the court case ended with the conviction by the jury, and the defendants being ‘put back’ to await sentencing. It did not report on the judge’s decision, delivered a week later, not to pass sentence on them. This decision was reported the next day in the Cork Daily Herald, a journal that was not widely read in West Cork. Naturally, given that “both William Templetons” (as His Lordship referred to them) “belong[ed] to Belfast,” a week later the Belfast Newsletter did carry the Daily Herald’s report of it. Likewise, the Cork Examiner’s report of the Board of Trade enquiry did not mention the clemency granted by the judge, but the Daily Herald and the Belfast Newsletter did.

We could not find any references in any the newspapers of that time to the death of a ‘galley boy’ or ‘cabin boy.’

Today’s reader is left to create his/her own headline for any further re-telling of the story.

Acknowledgments

Jo Anne Dancy, great-granddaughter, Robin Diggs Campbell and Judith Ann Vennes, great-granddaughters, of the captain (Annex 4); McGill University, UCC, and Cork County libraries; Irish Newspaper Archives; British Newspaper Archive; Marie D’Arcy; Ted O’Sullivan; Helen Riddell; Pat Cowan, and the many other persons I discussed this with; ChatGPT for using nautical knowledge to decipher poor-quality parts of newspaper images, and serving as an editorial sounding board.

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ANNEX 1: Charges

THE CORK EXAMINER,
WEDNESDAY MARCH 15, 1876

CORK SPRING ASSIZES - COUNTY COURT
(Before Mr. Justice LAWSON).

William Templeton (captain) and William Templeton (boatswain), belonging to the Joseph Howe, which was wrecked last month off Bere Island, were indicted for having on the 11th January feloniously killed and slain George H. Roberts, mate of the same vessel. They pleaded not guilty, and were defended by Mr. Atkinson, B.L., instructed by Mr. Fulham.

Sir Colman O’Loghlan, Q.C., Messrs. ExxHaus, Q.C., Greene, Q.C., and J. O’ Hea, instructed by Mr. H. Gillman, Crown Solicitor, prosecuted.

Sir Colman O’Loghlan stated the case on behalf of the Crown.

Evidence was then given.

Peter Seymour, cook and steward, deposed that he shipped on board the Joseph Howe at occasion when the captain struck him with his North Shields, and sailed in her to Peru and thence to Minatitlan. When the vessel came to anchor at the latter port late at night, as they were hauling down the mainsail, the captain called on the deceased man to lend a hand, but Roberts being aged and unable to come as quickly as was desired, the captain ran towards him and upset him on the deck with his hand and foot. Up to that time deceased complained of diarrhoea, and to stop it witness gave him some mixed flour.

Mr. Greene: Did you see the captain strike him afterwards?

Witness said he did not on that night. While at Minititlan the mate was in his room at one hand. Witness was in the pantry at the time, the door of which faced the mate’s room, and when he left to go into the cabin, the captain, who had not noticed him previously, said “when the like of this happens I don’t want you here”. On the homeward voyage he saw the captain strike the deceased on several occasions; never heard of

any provocation having been given by the latter, or that he retaliated or said to the captain he should not strike him. He saw deceased's face cut, and twice shaved his beard in order to wash the blood away. The captain on another occasion put Roberts to the pump, but being unable to pump, the captain beat him on the back with the rope's end. On the passage there was sickness on board, and all, with one exception, had fever. On the day before the man's death witness saw the captain lift deceased by the neck and give him a shake, and heard him say he was scheming. On that day when washing Roberts, he saw black marks on his side, when Roberts remarked he thought two of his ribs were broken. Next day the man died. Witness never saw the man disobedient to order, on the contrary, he always said to the captain he would do what he was asked. He only saw the captain act kindly to him once, when he gave him lotion for his eyes, which were bad at the time, and when he gave him some rum and water the day before his death.

Mr. Greene: Did you see the boatswain do anything to deceased? I did. I saw him strike the mate on several occasions. I can't say whether the captain was in view on those occasions. Did you hear the prisoner speak about Robert's death? I did. I heard them say that if the old b----- had lived to come ashore, he would have hung him by the letters found in his chest. I saw those letters during the man's lifetime, and I asked him why he didn't send them by post. He had relatives in the North of England. He said he had no money to post them. I said the captain would give it to him. He said he would not, and he was afraid the captain would open the letters on him.

On cross-examination, witness admitted that at the time the vessel was wrecked, the captain was the means of saving his and another's life by lowering them on to a rock by the aid of a rope and that of two other men.

Mr. Atkinson—and the captain stayed on board himself the very last man—didn't he?

Witness—He did.

In reply to further questions, he said Roberts complained to the crew of the ill-treatment received, but not to the captain. Witness never struck the deceased or knocked him out of his berth, but on the day

before his death, by the captain's directions, he took him out of his berth to wash him and put clean linen and clothes on him.

Mr. Atkinson—Did you ever threaten to avenge yourself on the captain when you'd get ashore? Never. I never made that or any threat to him. Deceased was in a melancholy state of health before he died, and the day before his death he said he knew he would never live to go home, that he had been murdered on board, and hoped some member of the crew might bring it to light when the ship arrived at her destination. Did he say how he has been murdered? He did not. Accounting for several omissions in his information sworn before the magistrate at Castletown, which he now supplemented in his evidence, witness said sicce the information was taken he remembered many things.

Harry Gron, a German by birth, and one of the survivors of the wreck, deposed that during the voyage he saw the captain kick and strike the witness with his hand, and once with a rope's end. He also saw blood on the latter's face after the captain had struck him with his hand, and saw the captain capsize him on deck and Roberts bleeding. The last time he saw that was about eight days before Roberts died. Witness also saw the boatswain kick deceased.

To Mr. Atkinson—When deceased and I used to be at the wheel he never complained to me or the captain. I never saw the captain kick him with his foot but only strike him with his hand. Seymour and I have been talking together about this case.

The case for the crown having closed.

Mr. Atkinson addressed the jury for the defence. It was fortunate, he said, for the sake of justice, that the dead man Roberts spoke from his watery grave in the record he left behind him, and which falsified every word sworn by the witness Seymour as against the captain. Seymour, counsel asserted, deliberately came upon the table to perjure himself for the purpose of gratifying his contemptible sense of malignity against him because of some madness that occurred during the voyage. So far from being the inhuman brute Seymour would represent the captain to have been, the entries made in deceased's hand showed that the captain was most anxious for the safety of the crew, and did all he could in their regard. Unless, he repeated, the entries in the log book were the grossest fabrications, and unless Roberts, who made them, was the

instrument of somebody, of which there was not a particle of proof, they spoke trumpet-tongued of his client's innocence, and on those entries he confidently asked the jury for a verdict of acquittal.

His Lordship, in charging the jury, said he was bound to say that if the prisoners did commit the acts of violence imputed to them, having regard to the state of health the unfortunate man was in, he did not think they should have any doubt that the violence contributed to and accelerated his death; but the real question in the case was—did they believe the testimony of the two seamen who had deposed to the acts of violence?

The prisoners were convicted of manslaughter and recommended to mercy.

CORK DAILY HERALD,
WEDNESDAY MORNING, MARCH 15, 1876
COUNTY COURT
(Before Right Hon. Judge Lawson.)

At the sitting of the court yesterday, his Lordship disposed of the remaining county Crown business.

William Templeton, master, and William Templeton, boatswain, of the ship "Joseph Howe," were put on trial for the manslaughter of George H. Roberts, mate of that vessel, on 11th January, on the high seas.

Mr. Atkinson, instructed by Mr. A. Julian, defended the prisoners.

The following jury was sworn:—Messrs. Owen McCarthy (foreman), James Keefe, Daniel Callaghan, Michael Lawton, Frank Neville, P. Ahern, William Francis Lender, William Daly, John Twomey, Timothy Dougan, Patrick Geary, and Thomas Daunt.

Sir Colman O'Loghlen, in stating the case for the Crown, said the deceased man Roberts was in a very delicate state of health, and it was peculiarly the duty of the prisoners not in any way to ill-treat him. On the evidence there would be little doubt that the deceased had been ill-treated by both prisoners, and it would be for the jury to say whether his death was in any way accelerated thereby. The Joseph Howe was on her return voyage from Minititlan, in Mexico, with a cargo of mahogany. When it was approaching Cork, it was wrecked on Bere Island in

February last. There were nine persons on board coming home, only four of whom were now alive. Three of the others died on board, and two were drowned at the wreck. In the official log-book, in which the captain was obliged by law to make entries of offences, there was not from beginning to end a single statement of misconduct by the deceased, or any statement that the captain was obliged to punish him. There was an entry of the mate having been injured by one of the sea men named McClure, but from that time there was no entry till those of his death and burial. The cook would be the principal witness as to the treatment he received from the prisoners, and though the log-book showed that the cook himself had been punished, but upon his evidence it would be for the jury to say whether Robert's death was accelerated by any conduct of the prisoners.

Mr. Whitehead, of the Board of trade, proved the official logbook. In reply to Mr. Atkinson, he said there was another log kept by the mate called "the ship's log," which the Board of Trade had nothing to do with.

Peter Seymour, cook and steward, on board the brigantine Joseph Howe, said, on the night they got to Minititlan, the captain tripped and upset the mate when he, being an old man did not come fast enough; witness also saw him strike the mate with his fist; on the voyage home, saw him on several occasions, strike the mate without provocation; saw his face cut several times; the mate was put to the pumps, and as he was too weak to work at them the captain beat him on the back of the rope's end; on one occasion after the captain struck him, the mate had a black eye; on the day before his death, when he lay in his bunk, the captain lifted him up by the neck and gave him a shake, saying that he was scheming; there were several black marks about his ribs; witness never saw the disobedient, but he lost his memory and forgot to do things; he also saw a Templeton, the boatswain, strike Roberts on several occasions; after Roberts' death, he heard a conversation he heard a conversation between the two prisoners in which they said if the old b..... had lived to set foot on land, he would hang them; they referred to the letters they found on him addressed to his relatives in the North of England; he was afraid to entrust the letters to the captain for fear he would open them.

Cross-examined by Mr. Atkinson—I can't say whether the day captain saved my life at the wreck; he lowered me to the rock and stayed on

board himself to the last; I did not break into the cabin to take rum; I did not take some out of a jug; can't say that the captain had yellow fever on the way home; I was only logged once for drunkenness by the mate; the other entries about my drunkenness are untrue; the mate complained of his ill-usage to the crew, but not to the captain; did not strike Roberts myself; washed him; and put on clean clothes on him before he died by the captain's orders; did not threaten the captain when under punishment that I would see it out with him when I got ashore; the day before his death mate said he knew he would never live to go home, that he had been murdered on board, and that he hoped some of the crew would bring it to light.

Henry Gronn, a German seaman, deposed that on the voyage home he saw the captain strike Roberts with the rope's end; saw blood on Roberts' face after the captain had struck him; he fell sometimes himself, other times, the captain capsized him; about eight days before his death, saw the captain throw him down, and saw him bleeding; after that he lost his senses; so the boats were several times, strike Roberts on the ribs.

By Mr. Atkinson—Had been living at Seymour since the wreck, and had talked over the case sometimes; the mate suffered from venereal disease; he sometimes bled when he fell himself.

This closed the case for the Crown.

Mr. Atkinson, addressing the jury for the defence, said it was fortunate for the prisoners that Roberts himself spoke from his watery grave, and had left behind him a record that stamped as falsehood every word detailed here by the drunken cook, Seymour. He asked them to come to the conclusion that Seymour, to be a revenger on the captain, who punished him for his misconduct, was deliberately coming on the table to perjure himself to gratify his own petty malignity. The other man knew little English, and had been under Seymour's influences. Counsel would read them extracts from the log-book kept under the dead man's hand, which never entered one word of complaint against the captain, on the contrary said he was kind and generous, and attributed his death to the disease he was suffering under. The vessel was short-handed, the crew suffering from fever, and it was absolutely necessary that every man who could should move about. Counsel then read extracts from the mate's log. In one he said: "captain attending

carefully to the wants of the sick men..” Another described Seymour, the cook, who was sick, as anxious to return to work, “but the captain is afraid to have him return, weak, too soon, for fear of a relapse. Another entry stated that his eye was unwell ,and that the captain himself was sick, “but managing the best possible.” Where was the evidence that this man made entries by compulsion at a time when, according to Seymour, he was suffering from the violence and ill-treatment of the captain? Other entries described how the disease grew worse, and stated his doubts whether he could survive. Counsel concluded by arguing that this true record from the hand of the dead man completely displaced the evidence of the drunken cook, whose life the captain himself had saved.

Mr. Exham, Q.C., having replied for the crown:

His Lordship summed up the evidence for the jury. He was bound to say that if the prisoners did commit the acts of violence imputed to them, having regard to the state of health of the unfortunate man was in, he did not think there could be a doubt that this violence contributed to and accelerated his death; but the real question in the case was—did they believe the testimony of the two semen who had deposed to these acts of violence? The only things against Seymour were those entries of drunkenness against him in the log-book. With respect to Gronn, his character appeared to be a very good one, and he felt it difficult to believe that he could have joined in a conspiracy to take away these men's liberties. His Lordship ??reassessed the evidence of the two semen and then put it to the jury whether the log-book kept in the mate’s handwriting, in which he had not only omitted mention of any ill-treatment, but mentioned the captain’s kindness when he referred to him at all, whether this detracted from the weight of the evidence, or whether it was inconsistent with the case made for the Crown.

The jury, after a short absence, returned into court a verdict of “Guilty” against both prisoners, with a recommendation to mercy. The prisoners were put back.

At a subsequent period of the day, Mr. Atkinson said he had in his hand a memorial from a number of people in Belfast who knew the prisoners, which spoke of their good character.

His Lordship—I never mind these memorials, because they're always wrong.

Mr. Atkinson said the people who signed this memorial were most reputable.

His Lordship said he knew when the worst criminals were convicted that reputable gentleman sent in memorials in their favour. He would rather hear a gentleman examined on the table.

Mr. Atkinson said that those men belong to the North of Ireland, and therefore their friends could not be present at a moment's notice. He asked his Lordship to read the affidavit from a Belfast gentleman in the course of the day or two if it was made in Belfast.

His Lordship said he would hear it when produced, the same time expressing his readiness to send to read the memorial now presented.

ANNEX 2: The Board of Trade Enquiry

BELFAST NEWS-LETTER,
THURSDAY MORNING MARCH 30, 1876
BOARD OF TRADE INQUIRY.

CORK, WEDNESDAY.—A Board of Trade inquiry was opened to-day in Cork with respect to the loss on the west coast of Ireland, of the brigantine Joseph Howe, of London. The members of the court were—Mr. Macleod, R.M., assisted by Capt. Burney, R.N., and Capt. Beasley, R.N., acting as nautical assessors. The master of the vessel, Wm Templeton, was in attendance. This is the same man who was tried at the last assizes and convicted with the boatswain of causing the death of the second mate, but whom the judge, on a review of the facts, allowed to be discharged on his own recognizances.

The Joseph Howe was 354 tons register, and belonged to Messrs. Samuel Hill & Co., of London. She left Minatitlan with a cargo of mahogany in the end of last year, bound for Cork for orders.

Fever had been raging at Minatitlan, and nearly all of the crew, including the captain, had suffered from the malady. On the voyage two died, including the mate; and out of a crew of eight only six remained to work the ship, of whom one was altogether incapacitated, and the others were weak from their recent illness.

On the 29th January a violent gale was experienced, and the foreyard was carried away, in consequence of which the vessel was deprived of the service of two important sails.

In this way the Joseph Howe reached the Irish coast on the 17th February, and the weather was thick. An effort was made to weather land without success, with insufficient wind and sail, and with a heavy sea setting in on land. The vessel drifted on the rocks and became a total wreck.

Previous to the accident the captain directed the lifeboat to be got out. The boat was swamped and two men were drowned. The other two were rescued in an exhausted condition. Left with only one man, the

captain was unable to put out the anchors or do anything to save the ship. The inquiry has not concluded.

THE CORK DAILY HERALD
THURSDAY MORNING MARCH 30, 1876

BOARD OF TRADE INQUIRY.

At the Police Office yesterday, a Board of Trade inquiry was opened respecting the loss of the brigantine Joseph Howe, Captain, Wm. Templeton, off Bere Island, in February last. Mr. MacLeod, R.N., assisted by Captain Burney, R.N., J.P., and Captain Beasley RN, as nautical assessors, held the inquiry.

Mr. Bennett (solicitor) appeared on behalf of the Board of Trade, and Mr. A. Julian appeared for the captain, who, it might be remembered was tried with the boatswain at the last assizes for causing the death of one of the crew.

Mr. Bennett stated the case for the Board of Trade. The Joseph Howe was a Brigantine of 354 tons, and belonged to Messrs. Samuel Hill and others, of London. She was seven years old, but appeared to be well found and in good repair. On the occasion she was wrecked, she of the crew could also appear to have suffered from the disease. Mr. Bennett then was bound from Minititlan with mahogany to Cork, for orders, and was commanded by Wm. Templeton, who had a crew of seven. Soon after the vessel left Minititlan, two of the crew, including the mate, died from the effects of a fever they had contracted at that port. The captain and the other members detailed the facts immediately proceeding the wreck of the vessel on the coast of Ireland and called the following evidence:—

Wm. Templeton, examined by Mr. Bennett

—I was boatswain on board the brigantine Joseph Howe; was shipped at Shields, and was over eight months on board; the crew consisted of eighteen men, all told; remembers in the month of December, 1875, having left Minititlan with a cargo of mahogany bound for Cork; the ship was well found, and about a fortnight on the voyage, we lost some of our sails; we had two pumps with double chambers, worked by a fly wheel; two of the crew were laid up at the time with fever, and the rest were all

weak after recovering from fever; during the voyage we experienced gales of wind and heavy seas, and between the 27th and 29th January the foreyard was carried away; the lower topsail was carried away at the same time; several stanchions were broken; portions of the bulwarks were carried away, and the tarpaulin was swept off the main hatchway; remembers when nearing the coast of Ireland on a Thursday at noon the weather was thick and foggy. and the wind was west or W.S.W, moderate; we had all available sail set. We could not set the foresail or lower topsail,; we saw the Calf rock at twelve noon; when I went to the wheel at ten o'clock, I got the course N.N.W. $\frac{1}{2}$ W; I continued that course to between eleven and twelve, when the captain ordered her to be hauled up, and altered the course to N.N.W.; about twelve o'clock noon we were in my judgment, about 3 or four miles from the Calf Rock lighthouses lighthouse; I was relieved at noon and called again between 3 and 4 o'clock; the weather was then very thick, with a drizzling rain; we could not see the lighthouse then; we could not see three lengths ahead of the vessel; there was a heavy roll of the sea to the land; the lead was hove by the captain. Was the ship's course altered at any time that evening? I cannot say, but the vessel was hauling by the wind when I came up; at 5 o'clock, we again made the land on the weather bow. Did you weather the land? she would not do; we were trying the whole afternoon to weather the land, but did not succeed; then wore ship; saw the lead hove a good many times; about an hour or so afterwards we cleared the ship's boat and proceeded to get her out; I and three others got into her; while lowering the fore tackle was let go too soon, and the boat capsized and we were pitched out, but we got into her again; the sea was running over her, and we were pitched out a second time; two men named Christian Christian and Garrett Nicholas were drowned; I got crushed on the occasion, I helped to save a man named Seymour; the captain got on the bulwark outside and helped me on deck; Seymour and I were taken into the cabin, and we remained there until the ship got on the rocks; while were in the cabin, the captain sung out to us several times, sang out to us several times to come up as he expected the vessel would strike every minute; he wanted us to come up to save ourselves; he was stripped at the time; I did not come up however until we struck because I was so helpless I did not care what became of me, I felt a shock when the vessel struck, and in about twenty minutes afterwards, I came on deck; it was quite dark at the time, and there was no light that I could see in view, we had two bower anchors, a kedge,

and a stream anchor; the chains were on deck ready for use; we had the chains arranged a couple of days before, and both bower anchors were on the rail; neither of the anchors were let go, there be no person to let them go, the captain was the only person in deck at the time; there were heavy sea rolling in when the vessel struck, and the wind began to freshen after the accident; there were three compasses on board which we believed to be correct; there were several charts, a chronometer, and a sextant and a quadrant; on the day before the vessel struck saw the captain trying to take observations; the sea began to break over her a short time after the vessel struck; we made signals of distressed by torches. We did not fire any guns because I don't think we had any gun to fire. The sea was coming over her stern and running into her cabin, and she was striking at the same time; her head lay to the shore; high cliffs were right over our head; we wove a block to the end of the jibboom, and we succeeded in passing a lead line ashore to two men who came down the cliff; in that way we got ashore; it was clear daylight at the time; we had no deck load except one log which was secured with ringbolts to the deck; four of us got ashore; the captain was the last to leave the ship; the bottom had then begun to break up. We saw no Coastguards there until we went to the village a mile or two off; the village was on Bere Island.

Did you do anything to dismantle her? I don't know; I saw some boats about her.

Mr. Bennett. Oh, they were the wreckers

Cross-examined by Mr. A Julian—We had to leave Minititlan in consequence of the fever. Several other vessels at Minititlan suffered at the same time; there was an epidemic there at the time; the captain was weak after the fever, and he had to resume work before he was fit for it; that was owing to the gales; I was laid up for nearly twenty one days during the passage; at the time the gale came on there were five men and the captain available on board; two men had died from the effects of the fever; when the foreyard was carried away we lost the service of two important sails; between that and the 17th February, we were trying to repair the damage; we had favourable winds up to the time we sighted the land. When we saw the Calf Rock Lighthouse, the captain went down and consulted his charts; on his return and deck, he had the vessel hauled up and placed on the starboard tack; that was done for the

purpose of clearing the land; when putting her about the vessel began to make less way. What was in consequence of? The wind had died away, and there was a heavy sea setting in to the land; the vessel was drifting broadside onto the rocks for the want of wind and sufficient sail; we could hear the breakers; the captain ordered the life boat to be got ready, for the safety of our lives he gave us our stations in the boat; Captain Templeton ran a risk in endeavouring to assist Seymour and me out of the water when the boat capsized; it would have been dangerous to remain on board the ship longer than we did; in my opinion, everything that could be done was done.

To the Bench—before we got out the boat, we had strength enough to bear cables; the captain did not save what landed was we had cited; and I came on deck in the afternoon of Thursday and we saw the land of the weather bow, the captain said there was no distinguishing mark to enable him to make out the headland; the top of the land was then obscured by fog; the captain always hove the land himself; the deep the deep-sea lead was cast on this Thursday by the captain; the fog that day was a lifting and clearing one; sometimes the horizon was clear, and then a bank of fog came down.

By Mr. Julian—One of the men in the boat was sick, and had to be helped in; he had been sick for four months, and unable to render any assistance.

This completed the witness's testimony and the court of adjourned, it being four o'clock.

Last update: Dec 23, 2025

ANNEX 4: Photographs



*2024, L to R:
Robin Diggs Campbell and Judith Ann Vennes, great-great-granddaughters,
Jo Anne Dancy, great-granddaughter.*